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The Rational Terrorist: Toward a New Theory of Terrorism*

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Introduction

Terrorists are typically viewed as romantic idealists or mindless predators. Rationality based approaches to terrorist behavior have correspondingly not been attempted. Terrorist movements vary greatly in composition, objectives and strategy. Yet terrorism, like more conventional warfare, can be understood as politics pursued by other means. Accordingly, political economic models of international conflict can be applied to the strategies of terrorist alliances, albeit with diminished empirical utility owing to the shadowy character and small numbers of their quarry.

Since Mancur Olson's pioneering work in the mid 1960's, the economic theory of collective (or "public") goods has been used with varying success to describe all sorts of political activity and inactivity. Olson and others have often treated the international security provided by peacetime alliances as a collective good. Yet these scholars have not applied their frameworks to the fighting conducted when alliances are actually employed in wartime; nor have they considered the special problems nonstate alliances have in collectively waging their conflicts. This paper will briefly outline the collective goods paradigm and its previous employment in studies of defense policy. Further, we will suggest how these concepts could describe terrorist movements.

Collective Goods

In his seminal *The Logic of Collective Action*, Mancur Olson develops the collective goods approach previously suggested by Head, Musgrave, Samuelson, and other economists. Olson applies the concept to such behavior as political lobbying, the formation of labor unions, international alliance behavior, and even the revolution of the proletariat.¹

Purely collective (or public) goods can be distinguished from private goods by their nonexclusivity and nonrivalness. Private goods are exclusive and rival since the consumer of a particular good can exclude others from its consumption and since his or her consumption leaves a smaller quantity of the good to be consumed by others. For example, a consumer's purchase of a Cabbage Patch Doll, given a (perhaps artificially) limited supply of the good, leaves one less doll to be enjoyed by others. The consumer, moreover, can and probably will exclude others from using his or her doll. National defense, in contrast, is consumed equally by all within a polity (though not all may desire the same amount of defense) and none can be deprived of its

benefits. The supply is similarly nonrival since the addition of an individual to the polity and his or her consumption of its defense does not leave less of the good to be enjoyed by others.

Since none can be excluded, all within a polity will benefit from the provision of a collective good whether or not they contribute their share to cost of the good. In a large community, moreover, an individual's contribution to the provision of a collective good will have no recognizable impact on its supply and hence provide little strictly utilitarian incentive for the individual to contribute. This is not to say that nonmaterial, or in economic parlance, "nonrational" incentives are not important.² Still, in these large or "latent" groups, many will free ride, enjoying the benefits of the collective good without paying their fair share for it. Olson therefore argues that collective goods provided by and for large communities will normally be provided in a severely suboptimal quantity (and may not be provided at all) unless individuals are coerced to contribute or given selective incentives only available to those who do contribute.³ Mandatory taxation is an example of the former. The magazines, special insurance policies, trips, and other selective incentives offered to members of unions and various lobbying organizations are examples of the latter. Apparently, few farmers, factory workers, or others will join organizations which could yield their groups great benefits unless they are coaxed by selective incentives or intimidated in various ways some not unlike terrorism.

This simple understanding leads to interesting propositions about actor size and organization formation. Most important, large actors may have sufficient incentive to provide a collective good benefiting many others simply because they have so much at stake and since their resources are sufficient to provide all or most of the cost of the good. For example, Olson and Zeckhauser found that the larger members of the NATO alliance bore a disproportionate share of the cost of the common defense. The large had less to gain from driving a hard bargain and more to lose from withdrawal.⁴

Other researchers have extended this analysis, finding that different types of NATO defense expenditures are more or less collective in nature and accordingly more or less susceptible to the free-riding of the small. For example, the airports, roads, and other infrastructure costs of the alliance provide many distinctly national benefits. It is therefore not surprising that the small members of NATO fully shoulder their fair share of these burdens.⁵

The Political Economics of Fighting Alliances

Despite the various applications of collective goods theory to alliance behavior, none have applied the paradigm to the actual fighting conducted when alliances are employed in wartime. This is largely because victory in war, unlike national defense in peacetime, is a good so highly valued that any increase in national income will be devoted to its provision.⁶ Within very loosely joined or even essentially hostile alliances systems, very different processes may be at work. Within these alliances, the exhaustion of allies may be a good valued nearly so highly as the eventual defeat of the

collective foe. Free-riding might occur, for some members will make calculated effort to allocate a disproportionate share of the costs of the conflict to their allies. For example, revisionist historians have suggested that the Anglo-American refusal to set up a second front against the Nazis until late in World War II reflects a deliberate effort to bleed the Red Army white in its struggle against the Germans and thereby facilitate the Anglo-American domination of postwar Europe.⁷

Our previous theoretical work suggests that such tendencies may be pronounced within guerrilla alliances or other alliances composed of nonstate actors. Nonstate allies are particularly unlikely to be well united in the pursuit of victory. If they are essentially revolutionary rather than nationalist movements, they will lack an acceptable prewar status quo from which to gain precedents for the postwar distribution of stakes. All the rebels are after the total control of the same government, and in the past many fully successful revolutions have served as a prelude to a far bloodier struggle determining who holds final power.⁸ It has been suggested that Lenin had this in mind when he held back his Bolsheviks from participating in the March 1917 revolution against the Czar. He thereby conserved his forces while the Liberals lost troops in the revolution, leaving themselves ripe for defeat in the fall.⁹

In extreme cases, one coalition member could even betray another. For example, it has been suggested that during the Vietnamese revolution against France, the Communist Party gave the French secret police a list of Nationalist Party leaders, even though the Communists and Nationalists were loosely allied at the time.¹⁰

Terrorism and Guerrilla Conflict

In our previous work we have suggested that, particularly within guerrilla alliances, collective warmaking can be seen as a collective good subject to the free-riding common to such goods. The same may not be quite so true of terrorist alliances.

Terrorism is often thought of as guerrilla war; indeed, the two terms are often employed interchangeably. In contemporary debate it is typically assumed that both are modern conflicts waged by revolutionary forces using hit and run tactics to wear down and eventually defeat the superior forces of the reactionary state. In fact, both guerrilla war and terrorism date back to ancient times. The Chinese empire faced essentially guerrilla war in defeating peasant revolts as early as the Fourth Century B.C.. The Jewish Maccabees fought a successful guerrilla war against the Syrians in the Second Century B.C., and the Roman Empire defeated guerrilla movements undertaken at various times by the Jews, North Africans, and Celtiberians.¹¹ Similarly, Rapoport notes that the Zealots-Sicarii employed terrorism against the Romans and moderate Jewish leaders in the First Century A.D., and the Thugs have used terror against individuals for thousands of years.¹² Moreover, no ideology holds a monopoly on either strategy. Skilled guerrillas now fight Marxist regimes in Angola and Afghanistan, and one of the most successful (though losing) guerrilla struggles of all time

was fought against the French Revolutionary government by the rightist peasants and nobles of the Vendee region. The Black Hundreds, Nazis, KKK, and other reactionary groups have with varying success employed terrorism or spawned terrorist movements.

What then, are these phenomena? Guerrilla warfare denotes tactics employed by forces which cannot profitably meet the enemy in a conventional battle because they are outgunned. The Guerrillas therefore employ relatively small scale assaults on weak enemy positions, frequently disbursing after an attack. Their very weakness dictates a largely nocturnal strategy most active in remote regions where forests or rough terrain hinder the dominate army in its search and destroy missions. Successful guerrilla forces develop "liberated zones" under their authority. These regions serve symbolic purposes, provide training grounds, supply food and other materials, and give fighters a refuge. Victorious guerrilla forces (and few are victorious) must eventually form units large enough to fight conventional battles. Guerrillas can never defeat a determined enemy without reaching this stage.¹³

Terrorism denotes the killings, bombings, robberies, kidnappings, hijackings, and other destructive acts committed by small groups or individuals aimed at overthrowing or influencing the regime.¹⁴ (Notably, some of these activities, particularly robberies, can also help keep the terrorists in business.) Terrorism may be employed against specific targets linked to the offending regime or movement. Just as typically it is employed at random, to undermine regime authority by making it clear that the government cannot protect its citizens.¹⁵

Terrorism may act as adjunct to a guerrilla movement. For example, the Viet Cong quietly assassinated thousands of South Vietnamese village leaders in the 1950's and 1960's to remove the indigenous nonCommunist leadership.¹⁶ Terrorism cannot on its own win power however, for by definition terrorism employs forces far too small to directly combat the state. Notwithstanding current speculation about nuclear terrorism and the optimistic Narodnaya Volya belief that government would fall if a few leaders were eliminated, terrorism has never toppled a regime by itself. The most it has managed has been to help make liberal democracies less liberally democratic or (usually unintentionally) helped authoritarians overthrow such relatively benign regimes. The highly active leftist Uruguayan and Argentine terrorists of the 1970's, for example, only succeeded in provoking rightist military coups against the rather democratic governments of their nations. The new military regimes then fought ruthless (and successful) "dirty wars" against the terrorist movements.¹⁷

The Rational Terrorist

Terrorist acts may be motivated by material or purposive incentives. (Terrorist groups are often held together by social ties, yet these incentives do not in and of themselves require terrorist acts for fulfillment.) As Laqueur details, many modern day terrorists are sponsored by governments. Libya, Iraq, Iran, South Yeman and various other states have subsidized

terrorists or even paid for them to handle specific jobs. The infamous "Carlos" and certain other terrorists and terrorist trainers are distinguished by their Swiss bank accounts and other benefits provided by governments who make use of their skills in furthering national foreign policy goals and enhancing international prestige. Such a nominal world power as Libya, for example, has gained considerable influence by sponsoring various movements.¹⁸ While normally motivated at least partly by ideological concerns, it can be suggested that these terrorists are as much mercenaries as freedom fighters.

International terrorists employed or supported by governments can find refuge within those nations. Even if apprehended, they may well serve only a few years provided that they ply their trade within relatively liberal states.¹⁹ Terrorism can therefore offer good employment for the utility minded soldier.

These relatively utilitarian terrorists may work together with other groups at times. Yet profiteering fighters are apt to lack a meaningful long term program separate from that of their sponsors. Arrangements between these terrorist groups will therefore be set up to tackle a single act in a contractual manner rather than to independently conduct an allied campaign against the same enemy state. The respective inputs of personnel for each act are thus known. Ironically, free-riding among such groups is therefore not possible, at least partly because of the rationality of the terrorists and calculability of inputs, outputs, and inducements.

More typical terrorists are motivated by essentially purposive aims. This is particularly true of those operating within a single authoritarian or totalitarian state. Such terrorism holds great risks and no material rewards save the occasional take from a bank heist or kidnapping. Even then, repressive governments are apt to treat anti-state robbers far more harshly than common criminals, making politically justified crime a far riskier profession. Of course, this is not always the case in more liberal states. Indeed, in these nations apprehended terrorists may be treated more humanely than ordinary criminals since it is assumed that they acted for reasons more noble than personal gain. In addition, since liberal states see nonviolent pressures as legitimate, they may also view violent political activity in a more restrained fashion than nonliberal states and may even give in to certain pressures in hope of buying them off in the same manner that nonviolent pressure groups can be pleased. For some purposively motivated terrorists, terror is an end in itself. Indian Thugs, for example, killed as a religious sacrifice to Kali, who derived satisfaction from the suffering of the victim and dedication of the murderer.²⁰ More recently, Fanon has suggested that the mere act of violence against an "oppressor" is emotionally liberating.²¹ In addition, it must be suggested that at least some terrorists derive pleasure from the adventure of their activity. For participants with these primary motivations, no coalition partners are necessary. If coalitions do occur, no partner will seek to avoid activity, for participation itself is the goal, whatever its cost. Similarly, these groups are unlikely to be appeased by inducement offers from their targets, for their aims are by nature intangible.

Terrorism is more typically employed as a means to the end of altering government policy (as in anti-abortion bombings or bombings protesting American involvement in Vietnam) or eventually taking power by destroying the government leaders or mass confidence in them. This basic proposition has important implications for the political economy of terrorism. First, those protesting particular policies can often be appeased by concessions, particularly if the sacred policies are singular in nature and not linked to a broad ideology. Further, even in relatively liberal states where terrorists are not likely to meet death or torture, those so determined as to employ terrorism are either abherent personalities, or, more often, motivated by deeply held ideals which tolerate little deviation. Either way, it is not surprising that broad terrorist "movements" (e.g., the PLO, the IRA, the Weathermen and Yippies, etc.) are typically well splintered alliances of narrow factional groups. This has implications for coalitional behavior within such alliances, for free-riding or even betrayal to the state authorities can be expected.

In radical perspectives, free-riders are moderates who choose less risky (and less violent) means of carrying out the struggle against the regime. For example, in the Introduction to his *Terrorism and Communism* Trotsky condemns the followers of Kautsky, who refrains from and advises against violent revolutionary action. Though not always in support of terrorism, Lenin similarly attacks the Mensheviks for their moderation in the struggle.²² Similar denunciations of moderates have been made by rightist and nationalist terrorists. In the eyes of radicals, violent action is necessary for meaningful change. Those individuals and groups which do not assist in terrorism and revolt are simply free-riding off the efforts of others by avoiding the risky contributions to social transformation while being perfectly ready to benefit from it if it comes to pass.²³

Betrayal is of a somewhat different character. It can be suggested that the aforementioned hostility extremist groups hold for their natural allies encourages betrayal to the authorities. For example, factions within the broad Armenian ASALA terrorist organization regularly betray other factions to Western authorities and even engage in acts of terror against them.²⁴ The Vietnamese case mentioned above can also be cited, and it is hardly surprising that terrorist groups confide little in their allies even where police penetration is not feared. In other instances moderate supporters of the cause may betray terrorists to reach accommodation with the regime or because they themselves fear the extremists. In a somewhat different vein, it can be suggested that terrorists may wish the destruction of other antigovernment groups since those groups compete for followers during the struggle and could well compete for power should the antigovernment activity ever succeed.²⁵ Given these incentives for betrayal, it is not surprising that a determined and united secret police or military can generally learn a great deal about a terrorist group and destroy it. As Laqueur's work notes time and time again, terrorists operating within a single regime, particularly an oppressive one, usually have short life spans whatever their level of popular support or ideological merit. This seems less true of ethnic groups

than of fundamentally ideological ones, perhaps because ideological motivations are inherently more subject to disagreement (and corresponding problems of collective action) and less apt to gain widespread support.

It can be suggested that Marxist theory, at least, takes some notice of these factors. Communist political and military organizations attempt to gain dominance over their leftist (and other) allies and integrate them into a "united front" before fully pressing the battle against the government.²⁶ As Marx's reflections about the Paris Commune make clear, he distrusted allies and was keenly aware of the difficulties of coordinating a proletariat represented by more than one organization.²⁷ Lenin's views on the subject have already been noted, and the united front strategy could be interpreted as a means to eliminate rational free-riding or betrayal on the part of allies.

Conclusion

Political Economic approaches hold considerable power in explaining the micro level organization of interests. In addition, these analyses have been usefully employed to describe the behavior of international military alliances operating in peacetime. Political economic thinking has not been used to analyze fighting alliances, but we maintain that under certain circumstances nations and organizations will free-ride off their allies in collective warmaking. This is particularly true of the nonstate alliances employing terrorism or fighting guerrilla wars.

From our standpoint, terrorism differs most from guerrilla war in its smaller probability of winning power. It is not surprising that many terrorists---some of them essentially mercenaries---are not clearly after taking over government. This is important since the incentives which drive terrorists have implications for combatting them. For example, if nations band together to liquidate mercenary terrorists even within their sponsor states, this activity will no longer offer adequate economic rewards and will probably diminish. Of course, such anti-terrorist activity can itself be considered a collective good subject to considerable free-riding on the part of nations. Moreover, such activity is unlikely to succeed so long as a large number of states tacitly approve of (even if they do not support) terrorists with foreign policy goals congruent to their own.

Other terrorists are motivated by the thrill of action or the joy of violence against an "oppressor." Again, more aggressive pursuit of terrorists could have some deterrent effect. Yet the nature of these motivations suggests that these forms of terrorism will be difficult to stop since the act of terror is an end in itself rather than a means to make money or alter policy.

Perhaps most typically, terrorists use their acts as a means to an ideological end. In these cases, moderates can often be coopted or convinced to leave the struggle and betray radicals to the regime (or at least "free-ride" off their violent cohorts) if certain concessions are granted them even as the state acts aggressively against the terrorists. Even when there are no moderates, the splintered nature of militant ideological organizations suggests that factions will often betray their allies, or at least

not greatly assist other groups under attack. The regime should, and usually does, foster the various divisions among these groups. Unfortunately (or maybe not), nationalist movements are far less likely to suffer the divisions of ideological organizations. This, combined with their mass base, makes them more difficult to repress.

FOOTNOTES

¹Olson, Mancur (1971) *The Logic of Collective Action*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

²Hardin, Russell (1982) *Collective Action*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press. In Particular, see Chapter Seven.

³Olson, *Op. Cit.* In particular, see the first two chapters.

⁴Olson, Mancur, and Richard Zeckhauser (1966) "An Economic Theory of Alliances," *Review of Economics and Statistics* 48:266-79.

⁵Sandler, Todd M. (1977) "Impurity of Defense: An Application to the Economics of Alliances," *Kyklos* 30:443-60.

⁶Olson and Zeckhauser, *Op. Cit.* p. 270.

⁷Ambrose, Stephen (1983) *Rise to Globalism*. New York: Penguin.

⁸These themes are explored in somewhat greater depth in "To the Victor Goes the Spoils: Collective Action Theory and Guerrilla War," by Robert Maranto and Joseph R. Goldman, presented at the 1985 Midwest Political Science Association Convention in Chicago.

⁹This case is described in two notable books. Alexander Rabinowitch (1976) penned *The Bolsheviks Come to Power: The Revolution of 1917 in Petrograd*, New York: Norton. Leonard Schapiro (1983) wrote *The Russian Revolutions of 1917: The Origins of Modern Communism*, New York: Basic.

¹⁰Pike, Douglas (1978) *A History of Vietnamese Communism*. Stanford: Hoover Institution Press.

¹¹See, for example, the first chapter of John Ellis' (1975) *A Short history of Guerrilla War*, New York: St. Martins.

¹²Rapoport, David C. (1984) "Fear and Trembling: Terrorism in Three Religious Traditions," *American Political Science Review* 78:658-77.

¹³Galula, David (1964) *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice*. New York: Praeger.

¹⁴Latin American death squads and analogous groups elsewhere are often referred to as "state terrorists." Such a designation is quite reasonable, but presents a topic largely beyond the scope of this paper.

¹⁵Laqueur, Walter (1977) *Terrorism*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, Chapter Two.

¹⁶Pike, Douglas (1969) *War, Peace, and the Viet Cong*. Cambridge: MIT Press. p. 64.

¹⁷Laqueur, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 186-7.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, Chapter Five.

¹⁹*Ibid.*

²⁰Rapoport, *Op. Cit.*

²¹Fanon, Frantz (1966) *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Grove Press.

²²Lenin, V.I. (1951) *Marx Engels Marxism*. Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House. pp. 186-99.

²³This is a common theme in the microanalytic rational choice approaches to revolution. For a good summary, see Morris Silver's (1974) "Political Revolution and Repression: An Economic Approach," *Public Choice* 17:63-71.

²⁴Gunter, Michael M. (1985) "Armenian Terrorism Today: Analysis or Autopsy?" presented at the 1985 Southern Political Science Association Convention in Nashville. See pages 1-7.

²⁵Maranto and Goldman, *Op. Cit.*

²⁶Galula, *Op. Cit.* pp. 46-8.

²⁷Teplov, F. and V. Davydov (1978) *The Socialist Revolution*. Moscow: Progress Publishers. In particular, see pages 68-9 and 312.